



## The Russian Women Lawyers' Advocacy Project: Improving Knowledge and Services for Survivors of Violence Against Women

*Women, Law and Development International*

While sexual assault and domestic violence have long been serious problems in the Soviet Union, the dissolution of the country that began in 1989 intensified women's vulnerability. An estimated 14,000 women in Russia die every year at the hands of their husbands, partners, or other family members, while reported crimes against women increased by 70 percent between 1993 and 1994 (Bogolubova 1996). In addition, economic hardship has increased women's financial dependency and, in turn, hampered their ability to leave violent situations.

Women leaders in Russia have long recognized the need to address violence against women (VAW) in relation to the development of a new democratic society. In 1990-91, hotlines and crisis centers were established to provide women with psychological assistance and limited legal counseling, followed by support groups and educational campaigns. Experiences from centers<sup>1</sup> have underscored the difficulty of attaining legal protection from acts of VAW. Russia has few legal provisions that address sexual assault and no specific domestic violence law exists under the civil or criminal code.<sup>2</sup> Rights education and public information on gender-based violence are scarce, while traditional legal training does not prepare lawyers to work effectively on such cases.

When a woman does exercise her right to make a complaint to the police, she is often told that nothing can be done until she is physically injured or that the matter is a "family problem." An examination of police records from 1991 showed that 13,000 of 16,000 rape complaints had been dismissed without investigation (Bogolubova 1996). Similarly, when crisis center counselors contact law enforcement agencies, they are often told that sexual assault and domestic violence are not "legal" problems.

This report describes a legal advocacy pilot project designed and implemented between August 1996 and September 1998 by Washington, D.C.-based Women, Law and Development International (WLDI) and seven collaborating women's crisis centers throughout Russia. WLDI works to mobilize advocates, activists, and researchers around the world to build consensus on the gender dimensions of rights. Other organizational goals are to clarify the role of the law and its potential use as a tool for women's empowerment and to strengthen women's rights networks.

### Objectives

The proliferation and expanding role of crisis centers in offering women support has made them an ideal focus for intervention programs aiming to reduce VAW. Participating

centers in this intervention project included two in Moscow and one each in St. Petersburg, Murmansk, Saratov, Irkutsk, and Nizhny Tagil. The project focused on provision of

legal counseling services, community education, and advocacy, specifically aiming to:

- Improve the capacity of lawyers and crisis center counselors to

<sup>1</sup> There are currently 32 crisis centers operated by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and 6 by the government.

<sup>2</sup> A draft law to address domestic violence, "Prevention of Family Violence," is currently under consideration in the Russian Duma. However, it is uncertain whether the law will be enacted. Furthermore, in its current draft form, the law includes provisions that would jeopardize the legal status of nongovernmental crisis centers.

provide women with services to address sexual assault and domestic violence crimes;

- Enhance public education on and respect for women's rights, including the promotion of legal literacy among women;
- Promote advocacy for survivors of violence by bringing public pressure to bear on government institutions, police, and local administrators.

### The Story of Olena

Olena had suffered five years of constant physical and psychological abuse at the hands of her (now former) husband. Under a criminal provision citing "serious bodily harm," she pursued a case against her ex-husband, requesting either monetary compensation or his imprisonment. A project lawyer from the Moscow Crisis Center for Women "ANNA" (Association "No to Violence") represented Olena, whose ex-husband was found guilty and ordered to pay 4 million rubles (\$706) to the court. Fortunately, Olena's lawyer did not give up, using the civil provision of "moral harm" to address the act of violence and secure monetary compensation for Olena. As a result of her experiences, Olena has become more confident and has spoken out about her situation and VAW in newspapers and on television.

## The Intervention

The WLDI intervention was based on a "learn-work" training approach in which skills attained in workshops were immediately applied and tested in real-life situations, in turn allowing for team building among participating lawyers and counselors and continual improvement of the project.

To this end, a "legal team" of two women lawyers and one crisis center counselor was established at each crisis center. Center directors selected the lawyers based on their commitment to work with the

centers for at least one year after the end of the project and their agreement with the centers' principles. In addition, WLDI staff established an advisory board comprised of prominent Russian crisis center leaders and rights advocates to assist with project development and to establish connections with NGOs and foundations working on violence issues.

A total of 13 lawyers and 7 counselors were trained in a series of five workshops designed according to key premises. First, the broad

context within which VAW occurs was presented in training sessions on self-esteem, the gender aspects of leadership, gender discrimination, and other issues. Second, team-building exercises aimed to establish personal and professional understanding and trust between the lawyers and the counselors. Third, training sessions dedicated to the analysis of legal teams' efforts enabled lawyers and crisis center counselors to explore opportunities for building coalitions.

## Results

### Provision of Legal Services

At each crisis center, lawyers actively collaborated with the counselors in working with clients. Some counselors began to participate in the lawyers' legal sessions for women survivors. Such coordination enabled lawyers and counselors to design legal strategies that included women's testimony in order to educate courts on the dynamics of violence. For the first time, counselors began to accompany women in the filing of a claim and participate as witnesses in court. The counselors also acted as "social advocates,"

providing survivors of violence with support prior to, during, and after the court process, thereby sending the message that women are not alone in addressing issues of violence and the crimes committed against them.

The legal teams that evolved during the pilot project challenged the refusal of police and prosecutors to view violent acts against women as serious crimes. They assisted women in filing applications to open and retry criminal cases and issued complaints against police officers and prosecutors regarding their

failure to seriously examine sexual assault and domestic violence crimes. Specifically, the following was achieved since the inception of the pilot project.

- More than 1,500 legal consultations have been provided to women, representing approximately 25 percent of the total number of hotline calls received at participating centers. A system to track violent crimes against women and the actions of investigators and courts is being implemented at all seven crisis centers.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Data collection and analysis—based largely on the experiences of clients—have begun. WLDI is collaborating with project members to review the system and develop new mechanisms to improve monitoring activities.

- The legal teams in Moscow and St. Petersburg developed NGO initiatives, “Trust” and “Alexandra” (the Legal Aid Society for Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Cases), with the goal of training their colleagues and expanding participation in the grassroots movement to combat VAW. The legal teams also expressed interest in developing an interregional network.

### Public Education and Advocacy Initiatives

The WLDI project challenged participating lawyers to define their professional roles more broadly. A training workshop on “Working in the Community” focused on the development of community rights materials, working with the mass media, and coalition building. In exchanges with counselors, lawyers were urged to perceive law as a language that must be comprehensible to the general public. The lawyers’ participation in the counseling process helped expand their roles as educators. Counselors also became more skilled at initiating dialogues with law enforcement and local administrative agencies through legal information seminars with the lawyers, who taught basic legal concepts and terminology. The teams took the following specific actions:

- At each center, project lawyers developed informational sheets,

explained legal provisions on how to file a legal complaint, and served as resources for counselors with regard to client sessions and hotline calls. As a result, some of the legal teams developed coordinated strategies for dialogues with police agencies.<sup>4</sup>

- Lawyers and counselors enhanced the public’s, particularly women’s, legal knowledge. For example, the Irkutsk legal team participated in an exhibition forum in order to conduct counseling and informational sessions with women.
- The mass media also served as an effective tool.<sup>5</sup> Lawyers and crisis center counselors participated several times in television programs such as “Twelve Decided Women” and “Citizen’s Court” and spoke on radio programs about the legal aspects of violence and family issues.
- Project participants worked together to develop educational materials. A pocket-sized educational pamphlet that explains the dynamics of violence and legal procedures and provides contact information on psychological, legal, and medical services was distributed in public places, such as crisis centers and doctors’ offices. In addition, plans were made to produce an educational film, which will be used as a tool

to encourage dialogue among the project participants and other legal specialists.

- Contact was established at the local level with politically active NGOs in order to increase public demand for legislative change and to improve responses by law enforcement agencies to sexual assault and domestic violence crimes. For example, the legal team and crisis center in Saratov wrote a chapter on VAW for a report by NGOs to the local parliament and the Irkutsk legal team collaborated with women-based NGO leaders to develop campaigns and informational materials.

### Conclusions

The WLDI project illustrated the benefits of training professionals to increase public knowledge of the causes and costs of VAW and to work with legal, health, and other systems to prevent its incidence and treat survivors of violence. The project showed how lawyers and counselors—who previously distrusted each other’s profession and had worked separately—can collaborate to effectively assist survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence in negotiating the legal system and becoming more empowered as individuals.

## Recommendations and Lessons Learned

The WLDI pilot study yielded the following recommendations for project implementors to enhance steps to address VAW:

- **Strengthen lawyer’s training to include client-centered services.** Training modules should be adapted for use in law school curricula and

on-the-job training programs. Law clinics should collaborate with crisis centers to give students hands-on experience in community-oriented

<sup>4</sup>For example, the Irkutsk legal team conducted an information session for a group of 60 police officers on VAW and crisis center activities and obtained permission from local officials to conduct additional sessions for administrators and police officers.

<sup>5</sup>Crisis centers have found that the number of women that contact them increases immediately following a television or radio presentation about their work and VAW.

law. Public interest law networks should be established with the purpose of strengthening the ability of trained lawyers to educate their colleagues on VAW, while law firms should be encouraged to carry out *pro bono* work on sexual assault and domestic violence cases.

► **Enhance the abilities of law enforcement officers and members of the legal community to address and protect women's rights.** Institutions that train police, prosecutors, and judges should adapt their programs to include sessions on the dynamics of violence and legal provisions available for redress by victims. Incentives for police officers to respond appropriately to incidents of violence and provide support for survivors should also be expanded (e.g., performance reviews, salary increases, and promotions). Judges and prosecutors should receive training and support to ensure that the judicial system is responsive and effective. Relevant ministries should be encouraged to develop proper procedures for police who answer calls related to physical and sexual abuse, including guidelines for

interviewing abused women and collecting appropriate evidence.

► **Improve reporting of VAW.** Law enforcement agencies, crisis center counselors, lawyers, judges, and prosecutors should discuss current monitoring, analysis, and reporting mechanisms. Individuals and agencies should also articulate how, by whom, and for what purpose such data should be used in order to help them perform their jobs more effectively.

The following lessons that emerged from the WLDI project have implications for future work on VAW in a variety of settings and countries:

► **Gender-based violence is a symptom of social and economic stress.** If systems (as well as the persons operating within them) are limited to addressing single incidents of violence only after they have occurred, violence will continue. Without a systematic analysis of and interventions to address the causes of violence, commitments by governments to protect, promote, facilitate, and fulfill the human rights of citizens—particularly women—will be undermined.

► **Broad-based support is crucial.**

While the WLDI pilot project provided initial steps in coordinating efforts among specialists, it and similar projects elsewhere need to develop a broader support base that incorporates professionals from a variety of fields. Any effort to address VAW requires commitment by organizations to work in partnership, as well as sufficient human, financial, and technological resources.

► **People are key.** In combating violence against women, it is crucial that society recognizes and responds to this problem as a crime and broad societal issue. Individuals and organizations must work together to change the perceptions of violence, enabling women survivors to know that they are not to blame for what happens to them and holding perpetrators responsible for their actions. Changes in the culture of violence and the mind-set of the public—through education, grassroots activities, and counseling services—are essential to mitigating the effects of, and eventually stopping, VAW.

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